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The Respectability Trap: Gender Conventions in 20th Century Movements for Social Change

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Cautious, careful people always casting about to preserve their reputation or social standards never can bring about reform. Those who are really in earnest are willing to be anything or nothing in the world's estimation, and publicly and privately, in season and out, avow their sympathies with despised ideas and their advocates, and bear the consequences.

Susan B. Anthony (1860)

Susan B. Anthony talked a good line when she admonished activists who sought to “preserve their reputation,” but most of us know that it is rarely that simple.¹ Her own life had interesting hints of how hard that full-on, don’t-give-a-damn-about-what-people-say lifestyle could be to attain. While Anthony’s activist partner, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, became more radical in her stand on the “woman question,” challenging marriage, sex, and Christianity, Anthony’s own radicalism mellowed with age. By the end of the nineteenth century, Anthony shied away from more controversial topics in favor of a singular focus on woman suffrage. She thus secured for herself a position on the dollar coin and a place in the cultural memory of the nation as **the** leader of the American women’s rights movement, while Stanton rarely receives notice beyond being Anthony’s sometime speech writer.

My intention in this essay is to look at a handful of women involved in the U.S. labor, civil rights, and feminist movements of the 20th century in order to examine how they negotiated the pressure to conform to societal expectations, particularly the expectations attached to being a ‘good woman.’ Women who outwardly aligned themselves with fairly radical movements for social change sometimes floundered when it came to deciding which codes of behavior and appearances to follow. Sometimes consciously, but often not, female activists – women whose work helped to further substantial critiques of power relations and the social conventions that reinforced them in some realms of society – found themselves caught in a “respectability trap.” In these moments, women have shaped, curtailed, or rearranged their behaviors or appearances to

meet certain social conventions and normative gender expectations, even when those conventions contradict larger goals or ideologies held by these activists.

How we present ourselves and how we are perceived in the world speaks to our assessment of self, our ability to access certain resources, and, as Anthony and Stanton perhaps demonstrate, our legacy for the generations who follow. While gender conventions certainly vary over time and across class, race, ethnicity, and region, appearing respectable has generally relied upon controlling how one is perceived. A middle-class normative respectability has a powerful hold on Americans of many backgrounds because of its association with social mobility. Proving one understood and could practice these conventions has long been a component of advancing oneself in American society. How someone appeared indicated their standing. A marker of the increasing anonymity of urban life that emerged more than a century ago, it became more likely that people would read and categorize the characteristics of those around them by their appearance, carriage, deportment, language, and even where (and when) they were in space. For women, these expectations reinforced notions that women's ability to act in 'respectable' ways indicated their moral worth.² Respectability, then, included a set of ideas, normative values, and behavioral codes that could limit women's access to the public sphere and create barriers to taking on leadership positions. In other words, society had laid an effective trap for women who challenged the status quo.

When it came to leadership positions, respectability could work against women in multiple ways. In many social movements leadership has been constructed as masculine, so being a "good woman" worked to activists' disadvantage because it ensured the women did not look the part. "No one ever asks," one Black Power woman activist noted, "what a man's role in the revolution is."³ "As young single women," Annelise Orleck writes of labor activists such as Pauline Newman and Rose Schneiderman, "their friendships with men in the labor movement were complicated by a need to appear respectable and a sense that men didn't respect them or their work."⁴ But blatantly rejecting dictates of gendered codes of behavior could also endanger the reputation of the cause at hand. To borrow Sociologist Deborah Gould's phrase, respectability was sometimes "the price of admission" for social change leaders looking to convince a wider audience of their movement's worth.⁵

Respectability often functioned as litmus test for women's inclusion in those social movements not explicitly about gender issues. During Freedom Summer in 1964, when civil rights organizations recruited a thousand mostly white college students to volunteer in rural Mississippi, SNCC organizers used behavioral and physical criteria in choosing women for the project.⁶ There was a particularly acute awareness and a concern on the part of veteran activists over how the white women in the project would be perceived if they were seen working alongside African American men. Local Freedom Summer leader Fannie Lou Hamer, for example, explicitly articulated these concerns: "I told them [white female volunteers] frankly what they had to expect. That just bein' in the Delta was goin' to be a red flag to the whites... 'Don't go wanderin' into town. It's askin' for trouble!'"⁷ Consequently, the white women who were accepted into the project found themselves greatly restricted in both the jobs they were assigned (mostly working in the freedom schools or doing clerical work) and how they could behave both on and off movement duty. Scholar Farah Griffin exposes exactly this feature of Malcolm X's ideology, arguing that black power equated respectability with protection for black women and this protection "limits women's freedom and mobility" both inside and outside the movement.⁸

The impact of decisions individuals make, consciously or not, about which behavioral codes they will follow are magnified for people who live in the public eye. And for those who are leaders – those who dedicate their lives to challenging certain power structures in society – negotiating the codes of respectability can carry particular weight. How these individuals presented themselves might undermine the organizations and movements they served, as well as troubling their own ideologies, leadership roles, and personal lives. Women in social movements, as Sociologist Benita Roth argues, are almost always risking more – challenging more – than male activists because their participation, even in movements that are not specifically about gender, challenge societal notions of what women should be doing. As Roth writes, "participation is a qualitatively different enterprise for women, who transgress not just the rules of politics as usual but the rules of gender as usual."⁹ Being a leader in a movement magnifies these challenges as leadership roles often required activist women to confront gender conventions by occupying public space, entering the political arena, taking on very

official positions, sometimes engaging in violence, and often de-prioritizing home and family. These actions in and of themselves confront convention, whatever the explicit goals of the movement. And, as some activists would learn, not following gendered codes for behavior could create a dangerous situation for women. To not follow the code was to trade away one's expectation of peaceful or civil treatment.¹⁰ Female activists must realize on some level what is at stake in the choices they make about where and how they live, how they dress, how they talk, and how they behave.

In many American movements for social change over the last century, women leaders and activists consciously used the dictates of female respectability in their tactics and strategies. During the 1937 Flint, MI sit-down strike that birthed the United Auto Workers union, founder Genora Dollinger, for example, counseled members of the Women's Emergency Brigade to make up stories of husbands, fathers, and sons. Positioning themselves only as concerned family members, they successfully stalled police, who would be less likely to push women out of the way, so that strikers had time to secure themselves inside one of GM's factories.¹¹ Similarly, Dagmar Wilson and her organization, Women Strike for Peace, donned white gloves and proper hats to challenge nuclear weapons testing in the 1960s, deliberately positioning themselves as middle class mothers rather than political activists. When the House Un-American Activities Committee investigated WSP and called Wilson to testify, the *Washington Post* published a cartoon demonstrating the success of this tactic. In the drawing, one representative asks another, "I came in late, which was it that was un-American, women or peace?"¹² For the purposes of this essay, however, I have chosen to focus mostly on the moments when women leaders in radical movements for social change applied the dictates of 'respectable' behavior to themselves reflexively, especially when it was not an explicit part of creating social change. When was it, in the face of the challenges they launched to various power structures, that activists pulled up short or retreated into the safe and the familiar world of 'respectable' feminine behavior? Which of the societal norms surrounding gender, race, class or other social groupings were the hardest for them to see as normative conventions? Which conventions were the hardest for them to give up?

There are plenty of examples of activists, and especially leaders, who got caught in the respectability trap as they negotiated the rough terrain of radical politics. When

second wave feminists initially launched protests against the exclusion of women from public accommodations such as bars and restaurants in the late 1960s, they initially built their arguments around challenging the notion that any unescorted woman at a bar was a prostitute. Consequently, these women carefully presented themselves to the public and the press in ways that declared their status as “respectable” women. Karen DeCrow, who would later become president of NOW, for example, marched in 1968 with a sign that read, “Women Who Drink Cocktails Are Not All Prostitutes!” and NOW member Judith Meuli responded to press questions at a Beverley Hills Hotel drink-in by saying: “I’d ordinarily never dream of going into a bar unescorted.”¹³ It was not until years later that activists, including DeCrow, could critique the ways in which these public pronouncements worked to reinforce the gendered codes of behavior that sustained precisely the kinds of gender inequities their movement sought to challenge. Even in an interview more than thirty years after activists successfully problematized these exclusionary practices, feminist author Susan Brownmiller railed angrily about restaurant owners, “How dare they, how dare they think we’re prostitutes!”¹⁴ The threat of being labeled immoral served as a powerful force in maintaining gender hierarchies and even some of the most committed activists periodically lost their focus on equal access as a civil right in order to make claims for their own – and fairly traditionally defined – respectability.

Radical feminists of the 1970s did eventually become so conscious of the restraining influence of appearing respectable that they cultivated movement norms that contradicted mainstream behavioral norms. The ‘uniform’ of the movement – jeans, no make up, etc. – is one example.¹⁵ But so was the language of activists. When Naomi Weisstein told a man that had propositioned her on the street to “go fuck himself,” she realized (too late) that she was going to receive a violent response for having “used a word that was reserved for males alone.”¹⁶ Interestingly, this is one case where an activist decided that she had gone too far in eschewing convention. After this particular incident, Weisstein came to believe that that level of confrontation was more distracting than productive and carried the very real possibility of getting more women hurt. This lesson is one Weisstein’s nineteenth century foremother had also learned. Susan B. Anthony joined some of her fellow itinerant abolitionist sisters in embracing the ‘New

Dress' movement of the early 1850s, trading full-length dresses and corsets for more loosely fitted mid-length tunics worn over billowy pants. Within a year and a half, however, she gave up wearing bloomers when the "mental crucifixion" of public ridicule – and the eggs and rocks hurled by her audience – proved too much to bear.¹⁷

What we should allow for, and what Weisstein came to realize, is that part of the challenge of trying to create radical change was that activists must disrupt social conventions and the privileges they bring. This was a task that has been particularly difficult for women whose gender training in industrialized America generally taught them that safety comes from being in the right place, at the right time, doing the right thing.¹⁸ To not act in "respectable" ways could, as Weisstein and Anthony learned, invite real physical danger as well as ridicule.

Successfully working around the traps of conventional behavior takes time, it takes a support system, and sometimes it takes a new ideology. The early- and mid- 20th c. labor movement leaders historian Annelise Orleck analyzes in *Common Sense and A Little Fire*, lived outside of conventional boundaries of respectable womanhood for both mainstream and immigrant America, but they did so in the company of other women making similar choices. Even so, they realized the balancing act required and often chose to negotiate that by drawing a firm boundary around their private lives and even minimizing some of their political beliefs. Long-time organizer for the Women's Trade Union League, Rose Schneiderman, for example, had what Orleck characterized as a "lifelong desire for respectability [that] constrained her behavior in ways that affected both the personal and the political."¹⁹ During Schniederman's entire 25 year intimate relationship with Maud Swartz, she lived at home with her mother. Schneiderman increasingly downplayed her radical past and presented herself as "mild and nonthreatening" in labor and government circles. Her writing assistant, Lucy Goldwaite, quit the autobiography project they were working on in the 1960s, declaring that Schneiderman had a "mania for respectability, which suffocated the story and robbed it of all drama or controversy."²⁰ Schneiderman was the extreme of the four leaders Orleck profiles, but all of these labor women and certainly other female leaders closely guarded their personal lives. They instead tried to focus attention on larger political issues and the

work of a group, rather than themselves as individuals, as a means of protecting their reputation in and out of the movement.

When it came to leadership within a social movement, respectability was something of a double-edged sword. Choices on the respectability front could have an impact both on a woman's standing inside the movement as well as on the fortunes of the movement as a whole. Female activists needed to prove their "goodness" to friend and foe alike, but doing that often forefronted their gender, which could weaken recognition of their leadership in movements that understood leadership to be a masculine trait.²¹ Further, women who acted outside the bounds of respectability, opened the door to "insinuations of prostitution or promiscuity" that might undercut not just her leadership but the organizing and reputation of the movement.²² In 1914-1915 strike by textile workers in Atlanta's Fulton Bag and Cotton Mill, for example, the company paid spies to follow strike leader Ola Delight Smith for weeks to try and prove she was having an illicit affair with a male organizer. When that failed, they paid her estranged husband to sue her for divorce on the grounds of infidelity.²³ Smith realized that the company was trying to use gender conventions to discredit her leadership and the strike as a whole. She fought back by confronting the spies, but she was still forced to greatly curtail her activities in order to do so, lest she get caught out at night, alone with a man, or in the vicinity of the beer garden and provide fodder for her enemies.

Ella Baker, active in the civil rights movement from the 1930s until her death in the 1980s, had a complicated relationship with respectability. Raised by middle-class, African-American parents in a small community with a strong religious component, Baker received clear messages about the importance of propriety alongside instruction on the need to serve one's community. She realized that for African American women, women like her mother and her classmates at Shaw College, demanding respect as 'ladies' was in itself a radical act when white American society was more likely to see Black women in subservient roles of mammy or auntie or as hypersexualized deviants.²⁴ Consequently, early twentieth century African American reformers deployed strategies for reforming race relations that relied heavily on notions of a "bourgeois respectability," particularly for women. As Historians Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Victoria Wolcott, Stephanie Shaw, and others have shown, however, this was a conscious tactic. Claiming

respectability was a way to protect vulnerable populations by demanding the privileges attached to it.²⁵ Respectability was also, within the Black community of the first half of the twentieth century, a prerequisite for leadership – therefore meeting its conventions, earning the recognition as ‘respectable’ could carry the opportunity for wider influence with it in the early civil rights movement.

It was on this point that Baker most objected to respectability as a strategy. As her biographer Barbara Ransby concludes, “The obsession with respectability, in Baker’s opinion... undermined critical thinking and lessened the ability of activists to be truly radical in their ideas, actions and alliances.”²⁶ Baker believed that this strategy cast elites as “natural” leaders and therefore excluded others. In seeking to build a more organic and representative leadership, however, Baker traded on her own respectable standing, always carefully presenting her middle-aged, middle-class, educated woman status with, as Ransby notes, “her purse tucked under her arm, her hat carefully placed, and her good southern manners.”²⁷ As one of her mentees, Bob Moses, noted, “She had this black woman’s manner, and she carried that with her into the dangerous arena of radical politics” and it was this manner that allowed her to maneuver through the offices of NAACP and college presidents, organizational board meetings, civil rights marches, gatherings in the homes of sharecroppers, press conferences, and the marathon meetings of student groups, situations in which Baker was always “Miss Baker” and never “Ella.”

Certainly Baker had made many choices that might have threatened this respectable image. She chose not to be a teacher, as her mother had wished. She never took her husband’s name when she was married and, later, she divorced. She always strove to keep the more personal side of her life private. Yet, she understood that “defying segregation inevitably defied the norms that defined middle-class femininity” and encouraged the younger generation of women to jettison many of the aspects of respectable behavior that she herself practiced.²⁸ It is here that Baker’s approach and influence can be usefully contrasted with the life of Rosa Parks. The two women were both organizers for the NAACP in the south in the mid-twentieth century but the rise of the mass-based southern civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s set them on very different trajectories. Parks found herself – or allowed herself to be, depending on which scholars you wish to believe – positioned as the genteel symbol of respectable black

womanhood, tired of the indignities of Jim Crow segregation, and willing to stand quietly beside the ministers articulating the vision of the emerging movement.²⁹ Baker, overtly critical of the politics of respectability and elite leaders, lost her job with Martin Luther King's hierarchical and patriarchal Southern Christian Leadership Conference. She maintained her commitment to radical participatory democracy, focusing on organizing with students and the YWCA, but she never gained recognition outside the movement as a national leader.

That Ella Baker had such a finely tuned sense of the implications of codes of behavior and respectability, but still often followed the dictates of gender conventions, returns me to my major point. Questions of when and how to follow societal norms appeared regularly for female leaders and the power of these conventions becomes more obvious and ripe for analysis considering the fairly radical nature of the movements. At times the traps women encountered were personal, as activists sought to arrange their individual lives. At other times the traps overlapped with movement strategy and decisions of where and how hard to push for change. Women such as Ella Baker, Rose Schneiderman, and O. Delight Smith, women who had achieved positions of leadership in social change movements dominated by men, often felt they had to meet this challenge by drawing firm boundaries around their personal lives, shielding their non-conventional choices from the scrutiny of those inside and outside the movement.

In the end, respectability was the trap it was for so many women activists for two reasons. The first is that respectability and how you 'appear' to the world does matter because, for women in particular, it is tied to morality. And, as Nancy Duncan points out in her writing on gendered constructions of space, to be labeled immoral – as women who transgressed gendered norms in public space often are – is an effective means of silencing women.³⁰ Women who failed to appear appropriately respectable risked everything from public ridicule to exclusion from the organizations and causes they supported. Second, respectability is connected to maintaining social recognition and the privileges that provides. To challenge dictates of behavior or standards of appearance – and the way in which those function as markers of privilege associated with the middle or upper class, whites, and heterosexuals – is to trade away the privileges and protections associated with those social groupings. Seen in this light, women who found themselves caught in

respectability traps can be seen not as weak or incompletely radicalized. Rather we should instead use their experiences to try and understand the complexities involved in negotiating societal expectations, especially within the context of movements that purported to be about questioning societal expectations. So, while Susan B. Anthony claimed that only those who “*are willing to be anything or nothing in the world's estimation*” could bring about true reform, I would suggest that there is too much at stake for female activists and the movements they serve to expect them to ignore or shun the conventions of gendered respectability out of hand.

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